

Katarzyna Bazarnik*

Land Without God

Interview with Gerard Mannix Flynn and Maedhbh McMahon

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Land Without God: introduction

L*and Without God* is a 74-minutes long documentary, written, directed and produced by Gerard Mannix Flynn, in collaboration with Maedhbh McMahon and Lotta Petronella. It tells a story of one working-class family whose fourteen members went through several “reform” and industrial schools. Founded in the middle of the 19th century under Poor Law Amendment, in the 20th century the schools expanded and developed into a system of oppressive labour camps run by the Catholic Church where the Irish state sent the underage poor, often on trivial pretexts, supposedly to be rehabilitated and trained for a profession. In fact, underfed and neglected by those who were supposed to be their carers and educators, the children were humiliated, brutally beaten, and sexually assaulted there. It is estimated that around 100,000 children were unjustly imprisoned and systematically abused until the Irish State phased the schools out in 2007.

Land Without God gives voice to survivors who are finally able to tell in their own words what happened to them, and how that systemic violence has affected their life. As stated in the synopsis, generations of Flynn’s family “for the first time, speak openly together about their childhood traumatic experience of being removed from the family home and community and being incarcerated in children’s homes and industrial institutions

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run by religious catholic orders. [It] is a search for truth, for justice, for an understanding of what happened to a whole family when they were children”¹. The scenes switch between individual testimonies of Flynn’s family members, and bits in which Mannix Flynn revisits now abandoned buildings and fields, and recollects, in the voice-over, his harrowing experiences. First facing the court when he was a mere four year old child, at the age of eleven he was sentenced to two years in St. Joseph Industrial School in Letterfrack for skipping school and stealing a dinky car. The recollections are interspersed with silent scenes in a classroom setting, in which Flynn writes on the blackboard: THE SYSTEM, LETTERFRACK, PRISON, JUSTICE, CHURCH, VIOLENCE, inviting the audience to ponder on these terms. Slow-paced and poetic, the documentary powerfully articulates how the shameful collusion of the church and the state devastated lives of whole generations. It asks about responsibility, and possibilities of redress. As Sean Dooley states in *Irish Film Review*: “The underlying theme of the story is that both violence and incarceration can only breed more violence and incarceration. This film is an important document that examines the legacy of institutional abuse by the Irish Church and State and poses the question of whether it is ever possible to exit the traumas it inflicted on the people whose lives it took away”². Nevertheless, the film also testifies to the ability to preserve one’s dignity and to grow in the aftermath of the trauma.

Land Without God, directed by G.M. Flynn together with Maedhbh McMahon and Lotta Petronella, was premiered in Dublin in February 2019, and featured in Warsaw Docs Against Gravity in May 2019, a month after the Sekielskis’ documentary *Tylko nie mów nikomu* [Just do not tell anyone] was released on YouTube. It received special mention for the Dublin Human Rights Film Award at the Dublin International Film Festival. It has been shown in selected Irish and British cinemas, and is going to be presented at several film festivals around the world.

Gerard Mannix Flynn is an acclaimed artist, playwright, performer, member of Aosdána³, and an Irish independent politician, serving as a Dublin City Councillor since May 2009. He was the first to speak publicly about the systemic abuse and persecution of children in Catholic industrial schools in Ireland. His novel *Nothing to Say*, published in 1983, followed by an award-winning play *James X* (2002), broke the silence around the issue. In 2004 he founded an arts company, the Farcry Productions, which produces visual art, performance and installation work around taboo issues such as child sexual abuse, violence, imprisonment, and addiction. He is one of the most provocative and eloquent literary and political voices in Ireland today. His novel and play were published in Poland in one volume as *Nic do gadania. James X* by Ha!art in 2011 (transl. by Grzegorz Jankowicz); he was also a guest of Conrad Festival in 2012.

Maedhbh McMahon, artist, scenographer and costume designer, studied documentary film at the Lux Centre, Hoxton, Raindance, and Westminster college, and obtained an MA in St. Martins London on the Magdalene Laundries project in 2005. She worked on costume design on films such as *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, *James Bond*, *Captain Corelli’s*

¹ *Land Without God* synopsis. On-line: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9149970/> [18.01.2020].

² Sean Dooley, review of *Land Without God*, *Irish Film Review*, posted on 18 October, 2019, accessed 18 Jan 2020, <http://filmireland.net/2019/10/18/irish-film-review-land-without-god/>.

³ Aosdána is an association of Irish artists. Founded in 1981, it consists of 250 members who are the most outstanding representatives of different arts. For their website see: <http://aosdana.artscouncil.ie/>.

Mandolin, Troy and many others. She joined the Farcry Productions in 2006 and has been a partner in its art productions and cultural output since then.

Lotta Petronella is an outstanding Finnish filmmaker, producer and writer of documentary and art films, awarded with the Stina Krook Prize. She holds a Masters in Creative Documentary from Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, 2017. She has collaborated with the Farcry Productions as co-director of *Land Without God*. Her new film *SJÄLÖ – Island of Souls* was released in 2020.

Land Without God

Katarzyna Bazarnik [KB] in conversation with
Gerard Mannix Flynn [GMF] and Maedhbh McMahon [MM]

KB: First of all, I want to thank you for the opportunity to talk to you about *Land Without God*, your film which tackles unspeakable horrors. It is part of your ongoing efforts to tell the world about the abuse of thousands of children from poor, underprivileged families incarcerated in industrial schools run by the Catholic church.

Yet, although it is a documentary, it is also a very beautiful, lyrical, poetic piece. Prior to the film you published a novel *Nothing to Say* (1983), and a play *James X* (2002). Do you think that art is a suitable form and medium to tell about harrowing experiences of people who have been in Irish industrial and reform schools? In other words, do you think that art – literature, theatre, cinema – is possibly a way to “exit the trauma buried deep in the bones of generations”, as you ask in the synopsis of your film?

GMF: Art – literature, drama, film – is a way of discovering things, of excavating things, things that are deeply buried, as if hidden in the ground. Art lets them be excavated, lets them be known, discovered, lets them surface.

Art is also about stories. Novels, plays, films are about telling stories; they let stories be heard. And it is about identity. It is about how you can find who you are. You can discover yourself through telling your story, you can reidentify yourself. First, we were cast as criminals, then we were redefined as victims, or survivors. As I said elsewhere, our experiences – the experiences of a whole class of Irish citizen – have been plundered and parsed and mediated into digestible fare for an audience willing to offer pity, but not justice⁴. Now, at last, we can tell this story in our own voice.

Because art is also about giving voice. In *Land Without God* I give voice to my people, the people of my class. It is important that they themselves should be able to tell their story. It should be told by the people who suffered the abuse, torture, trauma, not all the others who have been telling their story so far. They own this story and they are the only ones who can really tell it. These people are witnesses – and it is very important to give voice to witnesses because they have been through the process, they have lived through it, and it is only they who really know.

⁴ Gerard Mannix Flynn, Maedhbh McMahon, Lotta Petronella, *Land Without God* promotional booklet, the Farcry Productions, Killorglin, 2019: 15.

The media, journalists, therapists, politicians, those who have spoken about this, told it their way. They represented it the way they wanted. It was more about publicity, getting in the spotlight than testifying to the truth. Now we can present our own story, not *represent*, but *present it*, if you see what I mean.

It is a story comparable to that of Gulags and Nazi concentration camps. A lot of stories, books, films, plays have been made about them, but only few really convey the truth of what happened there because only few people knew what it was like to be there. It's very difficult to tell such a story accurately, truthfully, not to turn it into sensation, or sanitise it. Solzhenitsyn was able to do that because he was there; he knew it from experience, also Jerzy Kosiński in *The Painted Bird*, Primo Levi, Lanzman's Shoah film, and László Nemes' film *Son of Saul*.

First of all, it is important to acknowledge the story, not to deny it, to accept it as true. Nobody believed us, nobody believed what we have been through. So it is important to acknowledge this story, like parents acknowledge the fears of their child. If a child wakes up in the middle of the night from a nightmare, or comes running to them, afraid of the dark, or of the bogey man, the parents hug him or her and listen to them. They don't deny the child's fear, but they accept it as real, and let the child tell them what has frightened him or her. Likewise, it is important to let my people speak, to give them space to tell their story, and to believe them.

I live a different life than my family. I have realised I had more choices than they did, and that thanks to this I *can* tell our story. Some things are too painful, too horrific to tell, but art offers a way of telling them, and to move on with your life. Art helps ... – I wouldn't use the word "heal" – but art helps you to grow.

And this is about creativity, too. About how you see the world. After all, life is not about brutality. Life is about relationships, about being able to relate to another person, about respect to yourself, and to others. It is important to differentiate between Jesus and the church, between faith and church, between ISIS and Islam, between Hindus murdering Muslims and Hinduism. The church says that the truth will set you free. But they will never admit the truth because it would destroy them. It would expose what they really are.

But it is important not to hate the abusers. It's like getting out of alcohol addiction. An alcoholic can't hate alcohol. He must understand it, understand what it does to him, to his body, to his mind, to his soul.

There has been a lot of anger, fury, aggression. You cannot control anger. No, you cannot control it. But you can manage it. You can learn how to manage it, you can learn how you can turn its energy into something positive.

KB: Your film addresses the unspeakable and the unsayable. It is about the great silence at the very core of Irish society – the silence surrounding the institutional abuse of tens of thousands of children and youth. It is striking that your interlocutors tend to go silent or resort to ellipsis a lot: they often break in the middle of a sentence, or finish it with a phrase like "You know", or "We didn't speak about it. Everybody knew". Some of your family members refused to take part in your documentary at all. It is a paradoxical situation because you have made your film to give voice to them, to let them tell their story, yet they chose silence. In the film booklet you comment: "The beast that they placed in us is eating us alive, turning us on each other, against each other". How did they receive your film?

GMF: They all received it very well. And I wouldn't say that those who didn't appear in the film didn't participate in it. On the contrary, they did. They did because they are participants of the story, if you see what I mean. It is their story; it happened to them. They were and are part of the story. I also wouldn't say that they refused to speak. They participate in the film through their absence. They are present in the film through their absence – d'you see what I mean? This absence is very conspicuous – you don't see them all but you know that there were all the others who were also incarcerated, who also suffered, and who are now unable to speak because they may be too ill, or dead. Besides, it is a large family, and there will always be gaps. For example, my mother knew that we were going to make that film, and she wanted to speak, but she passed away before we could interview her, unfortunately.

So this film is made for them, for all my people. The children of those who didn't speak in the film come to watch it. They watch it and they get to know. They come home and say to their mothers and fathers: "Now, I understand, I understand more, I understand why you have been like that, what you have been through". For the generations to come questions will be asked about this chapter in Irish history, the grandchildren of those who were incarcerated will want to know, will have the right to know what kind of history has shaped their lives.

KB: There is another striking absence in your documentary: no representatives of the church, judicial system, and the state appear in it. Why is that? And what does their absence, or silence, mean to you?

GMF: Over the ten years we were making this film, we interviewed an awful lot of people, but they didn't have anything interesting to say. We realised soon that they were protecting themselves and the institutions they represented, the image of those institutions. They didn't reflect on what had happened, and on what they were telling us. It was all useless, meaningless what they said.

Besides, their part of the story has been around everywhere: in the Ryan report⁵, in the media, in the papers, on the radio and TV. They have already told their version of the story. What was important was to tell our story, and to tell it in our own voice.

MM: Initially, we were going to include more people, to show all those involved in the story. We interviewed over sixty people: therapists, journalists, state officials, church people, archivists, members of the judiciary. But they didn't say anything that mattered. We realised that what they said was sound bites, round, polished sentences like a news report but without feelings. But the first day we started interviewing Mannix's family, we knew that the story was here. Here were emotions, here the story resonated. It was incredible: to see what has happened to them, what that has done to their lives, and how they have coped with the past. So we decided to focus on them, to make the story in the film more focused. Because it became clear that it was their story that mattered. They had nothing to lose and spoke absolute truth. The professionals, on the other hand, are still employed or engaged with the Irish state. We live on a small island. To tell the whole truth could have consequences for them.

⁵ The report of The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (CICA), established in 1999 to investigate all forms of child abuse in Irish institutions for children, known as the Ryan Report, was published on 20 May 2009. Further reports were published on 8 July 2010, 19 July 2011, 12 November 2012 and 27 August 2019 (<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3c76d0-the-report-of-the-commission-to-inquire-into-child-abuse-the-ryan-re/>).

KB: Mannix, in the film there are scenes in which you are in a classroom where, in silence, you write some words on the blackboard, such as: SYSTEM, PRISON, LETTER-FRACK, JUSTICE. Do you envisage yourself as a teacher in these scenes? If so, what is the lesson you would like to teach the audience?

GMF: I wouldn't say I saw myself either as a teacher, or a student. I didn't think about these scenes as set in a classroom. Rather, the blackboard is like a kind of mirror: you are sitting in front of a mirror and looking at yourself. I sometimes needed a pause because the material we worked with was very hard, very painful. And I also wanted the audience to pause for a moment and just breathe, to give them time to reflect. It was necessary to pause for both the audience and us, the filmmakers. So the blackboard scenes are such pauses. These scenes are also like chapter titles. And the words I write on the board are the elements I want to draw your attention to.

KB: *Land Without God* was premiered in Dublin in February 2019, and then screened in Poland, at Docs Against Gravity in May in Warsaw. What were the differences, if any, that you noticed between the Irish and the Polish audience?

GMF: There were no differences. The audiences in Ireland and in Poland responded in the same way. As I said before, it is a universal story. Because those institutions were all over the world, in Ireland, in the USA, in Canada, Poland, Germany, Spain, Australia, Africa, in all the places where the church has had their schools and "reform" centres, in Poland, too. I know that there are similar stories of abuse surfacing in Poland now. And there are more to come because the way these institutions operate is similar.

MM: There are oppressed, suffering people everywhere in the world. It is a universal thing, so people can relate to this everywhere. But especially in places where they have experienced violence, war. We showed our film in Derry, among other places. People who saw it there were incredible; they responded to it immediately, they were so moved. They could relate to it because they have also suffered systemic violence, and they have direct experience of loss and, in the end, this is what it's all about. Loss of childhood, loss of family members, loss of faith.

In Derry during the Troubles every family has lost friends and family members and the grief is still there. In some ways it's about creating safe spaces for people to express their grief, and about the fact that justice has not been delivered there, either for the Bloody Sunday families, or family members of the protestants, so we all dedicate our lives to pursuing justice for those we have lost.

GMF: It is a universal story and it is a global story, too. It is a massive, massive story. We have only uncovered a tiny little bit of it. It's going to take generations to uncover it, to get to know what and how it was possible to happen, to realise the depth and degree of corruption of the church, and to understand its effect on people.

And it is an epic story. It is not a story of individuals; it is a story of a whole class. It is the story of how the state neglected and ignored us. Many who have seen our film say how poetic it is. But it is also a deeply political film. It is not about aesthetics. It is about politics. It is about telling the truth – and this is a political act. It is about telling what has happened to us and how we have survived it, and now we tell our story.

And this story is not closed yet. It is still a current story because no one has taken the responsibility for what has happened, no true responsibility. No one really understands, or cares what beatings, violence, sexual abuse have done to us. This is difficult because they

affect your body, your bodily integrity; and your integrity is shattered. And there is also the added issue of body betrayal and body memory shame – the physical memory in the bone. Which is the traumatic memory. The traumatic memory you carry with you all the time in your frame.

The history of sexuality is wrapped up in violence. Foucault and the French have spoken about these issues from a philosophical point of view. The ultimate goal is to be able to identify yourself and be happy enough with that identity and work with that, and this ultimately is about ownership.

If any person was to go into their past, three or four generations back, they would find all these fragments, elements that make up what they are today.

And although we discuss criminality and crime as a certain norm, an everyday, we have failed entirely to address the issue of sexual crime, particularly crimes of a sexual nature against children, particularly paedophilia. And the reason for this is not so much about the shame or the horror of it, but it is because of body betrayal of a sexual nature and how we respond to it. Because of the sexualisation of it, it is a very difficult thing to deal with.

So I am speaking here about the idea that most crime of this nature is perceived as a norm, and people who behave in a certain way don't regard themselves as criminals. It is only when the courts convict them that they become criminals. Most males tinker around the edges of sexual offences and don't really understand this properly, for example, pornography and the way it exploits those who are depicted in it. It is seen as a victimless crime, whereas it is not.

There are implications here but we don't discuss these implications because the female body is seen as public property. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to major exploitation, especially sexual one, and this has been the norm for centuries and, certainly, it has been the practice of the Catholic Church and the Irish Catholic State to treat women and children in this fashion. They have been open to gross exploitation in which they become non legal entities and non citizen, become overridden by an artificial higher authority that lays claim over their very being and their souls. They cannot even own their own suffering.

That's why culture and art are so important. Because art can help the truth be told. Because it can reveal the truth, and it can help us preserve it, not to hush it up. So with our film, and all other artistic projects related to this issue, we are making sure that our history is placed in the narrative and not written, as it always is, by the victors. Right now we have been excluded from our own history and we need to articulate this in a language and speak of our own making. This is what *Land Without God* is.

The Places of Empty (excerpt from the film)

*So they held me tightly
Morning, noon and nightly
Away from my family
Away from me
Away from everything
To the places of Empty*

*They strip searched my child's body
Grabbed everything they could see
Took everything they could find
Ransacked my innocence
Ripped apart my childhood virginity
Slapped me black
Slapped me blue
Bruised me back to front
Kicked and booted me
Until my young soul was twisted and smashed*

*Hung my spirit by the throat
Until its last frantic breath
Corrupted and cracked every bone
in my 10 year old body
And froze my once warm blood
with the taste of their breath*

*On and on it went
if not me,
than someone else
No-one could vanish
Nothing could hide*

*Harsh, cruel brutality
Was our daily bread*

*Forced on our knees at bedtime
Hundreds of us,
Young boys,
prayed to a God
that mocked us*